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ABSTRACT

American higher education in this century has been almost schizophrenic in its development. As money and knowledge began to spread more distributively across the population, the population began to demand for its children a more equitable access into the world of the more privileged. Education and privilege were highly correlated. Greater access is forcing higher education to be honest about liberal and career emphases in recruitment and curricula. It is not enough for administration and a few faculty to become actively concerned with learned-centered reform. The learner must be the center of his universe. The learner must be able to seek out persons and programs that respond to his or her perceived needs. The higher education institutions must perceive and appreciate the "universe" of need and opportunity if our universities are to be related to and supported by the whole people. Distributive rather than hierarchical quality is necessary in higher education if we are to share in the creation of a world of distributive justice. (Author/PG)

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DISTRIBUTIVE JUSTICE AND DISTRIBUTIVE QUALITY*

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It is good to come back to the Midwest. When Pat Cross asked me a few weeks ago to take this podium, I found myself unable to say no, for a number of good reasons. In no way could I assume to be a spokesman for the President of the United States who, I understand, your conference committee attempted to bring you tonight, but I had a long-standing respect for the broad concern and constituency of the American Association of Higher Education. In addition, I was intrigued with the possibilities of what the convention might do with its theme, "Learner-Centered Reform." For the past two decades of my life, I have been preoccupied personally and professionally in trying to understand the role of the individual in shaping his or her individual life in relation to the society in which one lives. Raised on and routed in an Illinois farm community only a hundred miles from here, I continue to respect what I have come to call the statistical wisdom of the whole people. In a limited, even provincial world, many such people seem to exercise more power over their personal destinies than do the sons and daughters of the so-called "best" people. In no way do I intend to put down initiative, ambition, expertise, or achievement. Rather, I would like to probe with you the possibilities of what initiative, ambition, expertise, and achievement might mean to individual persons in a world that respected distributive quality rather than hierarchical success.

Shortly after I had finished reading Halberstam's The Best and The Brightest about two years ago, I met an old friend, Fred Burkhardt. I informed him that if my memory were correct, he was the only person I dealt with during the sixties in Washington who never used phrases like, "the best people." He assured me that he hoped my memory was indeed accurate and attributed his attitude to his formation in the Al Smith liberal tradition. In that context, he quoted Smith as having once said, "The best people should always be on tap, but never on top." The phrase rang very true with the echo of The Best and The Brightest still strong in my memory. It continues to ring true as I wrestle with the problems created by a world of more and more sophisticated knowledge and of more and more narrow professionalism.

The academic world in which we all wrok and live is of necessity a world of professionalism and of expertise. The scholars of every discipline become a kind of high priesthood of their field of expertise to the laymen outside the field even as they remain a collegium of re-searchers trying to learn, to master what nobody yet has been able to teach. The field of expertise is expanded until it is forced to divide in order that the researcher be able to master in depth the new area of his or her sophisticated concern and maintain the position of pre-eminence among his peers and with them to the less sophisticated, the students, the learners or might-be learners in the society.

The "best" colleges and universities have always seen themselves as competing "best" faculties by just such criteria. Those faculties have competed for the "best" students to use them as intellectual journeymen in their continuing research and in the process to educate them in that tradition. The benefits of such a tradition are

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obvious in the research achievements of the pure sciences, of the social sciences, of literary scholarship, and of medicine. We can no longer imagine a world without the continuing development of that scholarly research tradition. Such research is a necessary condition for the fullest possible life of the whole people. In that sense, the scholar-researcher, "the best and the brightest" of the intellectual elite are the servants, the ministers, rather than the priests of the whole people, performing for the world one of the most necessary of its continuing life functions.

If, then, the Harvard faculty and the Harvard curriculum could be expanded exponentially, would we not have arrived at utopia for the whole people? I suspect that the Harvard faculty would be the first to reject that kind of utopia. They and their colleagues in comparable institutions - if indeed any other institution would dare to call itself comparable - have well defined their view of their teaching mission by their admissions criteria. They have for generations sought, nurtured, and sent forth the men (and recently a few women) whom Halberstam describes with both admiration and disdain as "the best and the brightest." The intellectual stimulation and the challenge to national and world leadership of those students have made their mark. The world would in countless ways be poorer were there not a Harvard. At the same time, it would be foolish to expect that men educated and reinforced in that kind of an environment would have much sensitivity, empathy or even understanding for the people they dream of leading one day or for the students, the would-be learners of the larger society.

Two years ago on a lovely Easter Sunday afternoon in New York, I went to join a number of old friends at an Easter Brunch. As you well remember, Easter of 1973 immediately preceded the onslaught of Watergate testimony which was to engulf us from that summer to the next. Most of us in that New York apartment, however, were already predicting the substance of what that testimony would reveal. I, I think alone, was somewhat optimistic. My optimism was based in a fundamental confidence in the middle America from which I came, a confidence that that America, confronted with the facts which we believed would be revealed, would move against a government of such openly sinister manipulation. My optimism was immediately doused in the cynicism of one of the more radical academics - an economist - who countered with playful scorn, "That's your problem, Jacqueline, you have too much faith in middle America." My response then and my response today is that I accept that accusation as both deserved and delightful. I believed then and I believe now that in many ways it was the high priesthood of the liberal academic world and the liberal press who helped to deliver my people into the manipulative hands of Nixon and Agnew. I shared then and I share now the substance of the social views of that academic world and that press far more than the social views of those who supported Mr. Nixon. But there remains a fundamental irony in a social position which would argue and work toward a more equitable distribution of wealth and services and at the same time disdain, or at best patronize, the broad-based population they wish to include in the new order.

Educating a whole people is a tricky business. Educating a whole people in a nation committed to free speech and to a legislated tax-base is even trickier. Experts in any field expect to form the neophyte in their own tradition. The free society which both respects them for their expertise and refuses to accept them as a power elite, must choose the extent to which their research will be supported and the ways in which their expertise can be available to the broad-based population.

American higher education in this century has been almost schizophrenic in its development. As the wealth of knowledge and of money began to spread more distributively across the population, that population began to ask and then to demand for its children a more equitable access into the world of the more privileged. Education and

privilege were highly correlated. Our catalogues faithfully stressed the dignity of the liberally educated person, the man or woman educated for life rather than for making a living. But we were pleased when writers assured our students of the differential in earning expectancies between the educationally privileged and the educationally disadvantaged. We were confused when we began to realize that the bargaining power of plumbers, welders, firemen, truck drivers and sanitation engineers had achieved for them a material standard of living equal to or greater than that of many teachers.

Greater access to higher education is forcing us to be honest with ourselves about liberal and career emphases in our recruitment rhetoric and our curricula. If ten candidates are clearly able to perform one available professional task, the other nine may find it difficult to adjust to a less-favored mode of making a living while they contemplate the wholeness of their liberally educated selves.

To the extent that we in higher education in the past have even inadvertently conditioned the whole society to a purely hierarchical notion of dignity, we have, I believe, engineered a cruel joke on that society. Upward mobility ladders are attractive until there is no room on such narrow rungs for the increasing numbers who might try to move "upward." The over-supply of Ph.D.'s who compete for teaching positions - if they exist - in our institutions are current players in that drama of frustration. The seven to ten able students competing for every available admissions slot in our medical schools are their younger fellow-actors in the play. The academic world has long been in the foreground of condemning the cut-throat competition of organized sports and of much of big business, where only a few can win the prize. Ironically, it seems to me, we have inferred if not directly stated to our students that the prized life-style was that formed in our own image and that those who failed or chose not to achieve that prize were dropouts from our educational system.

The results of that conditioning are beginning to confront us on all sides. The over-supply of trained, able and motivated persons for many positions is obvious. The under-supply of trained, able and motivated persons for the production of needed goods and needed services is also apparent.

As a trustee of the University of Pennsylvania, I recently listened to a briefing by the Dean of the Medical School. Citing data from the National Center for Health Statistics, he outlined the percentage trends for the supply of active doctors by specialty. General practioners comprised 50% of the active medical profession in 1949, 22% in 1970, and will be 11% in 1980. Medical specialists represented 11% in 1949 and are projected to be 26% in 1980. During the same period, surgeons will have risen from 17% to 31%, and perhaps most significant is the datum Other Specialties, principally research medicine will preoccupy 32% of the medical profession in 1980 as against less than 8% in 1949.

Here, again and emphatically, let me support the critical importance of research. In absolute numbers, perhaps we as a nation need that many research scientists (some 135,000) in the field of medicine. The testimony of experts should be thoroughly heard and scrutinized before we took a stand against supporting that number of researchers. The more apparent and immediate crisis, it seems to me, is the accompanying sharp decline in the supply of general practitioners and medical specialists together from 61% in 1949 to 37% in 1980. The University of Pennsylvania has a long and distinguished history as a research center in the field of medicine. Surely, it is not in the national interest for institutions in that tradition to shift their focus directly to provide practicing doctors for the daily health needs of non-Park Avenue America.

But it is much in the national interest for that university and other "leadership" universities to appreciate and deeply respect the total context. Great research institutions have always sent forth the greatest number of teaching faculties for the network of colleges and universities across the country. Nurtured in such environments, formed in the image of their mentors, those faculty went out to other expanding institutions. Is it any wonder that their primary motivation was to increase and multiply and fill the earth with replications of their quality education? One might start in a lesser institution, of course, but the aim was to bring it up to a higher standard or to use it as a stepping stone (or better a springboard) for a really "quality" post in a quality institution if one were to be a success in his chosen profession. The medical profession remained unconcerned and even skeptical of the development of health care delivery systems even as their own expanded professional schools sought out and nurtrued the students who would skew the supply more and more against the participation of their own in that delivery.

I have used the medical trend at some length because I think it removes most of us a bit from our own direct dilemmas but casts a strong light on the nature of those dilemmas.

It is not enough for administrators and a few faculty to become actively concerned in learner-centered reform. The broad-based population is with us in higher education. The whole people have at least tentatively staked a claim to our expertise. There are those of us, many of us here, I suspect, who rejoice at this development, long having believed that a wide range of richness was about to be available to the wide range of people.

Even those faculty who have not shared that view have suddenly become aware that warm bodies of lesser research potential are social security for the preservation of faculty positions. The young PhD in Renaissance Literature recognizing the dearth of faculty openings is applying to your community college in a small midwestern town and to Hunter College to teach reading remediation "if that's all there is."

The trauma for him or her if they get the position is real. The absence of quality instruction for their students is almost always just as real. The teacher who is learner-centered must care about those students, not in any demeaning patriarchal way but with a real respect for where they come from, who they are, and where they might be going.

If you say "The Paper Chase," you well remember the Harvard Law Professor who seemingly could not care less who his students were, but gave them at least a driving sense of where they should be going. There was no doubt in their minds that he respected them for that quest. When Kingman Brewster greets the Yale freshmen with the dictum that they are destined to be a thousand leaders, the life chase is on toward fierce competition or noblesse oblige.

The teaching profession, the faculty collegium, is the heart of the matter. Only if faculties can come to respect the dignity of relating their expertise to a broad base of people, with a broad base of needs, required by the society for a broad base of roles, will we have learner-centered reform. Major curriculum changes are empty unless the professors who offer those courses respond with zest and enthusiasm about the potential enrichment of the students in that room. They, the faculty, bring themselves and their intellectual formation to the enterprise. If indeed they have

allowed themselves to be liberally educated, the catalogue prophecies may come true. Their spirit of inquiry, their broad-based humanistic concerns will rise to the challenge. They will not curse the darkness because the light is other than that of the "good" graduate school from whence they came. The reform will begin in the individual courses and such faculty will form a new kind of collegium, challenging and reinforcing one another in a new quest to find the true relatedness of knowledge, of insight, of common quest.

Thank God, the relevancy binge of the sixties was short-lived. Labelling courses to describe superficial rap sessions that led nowhere could never be education. Courses must be substantive, and the expert must be expected to be the primary source of that substance.

But the learner must be the center of his own personal universe. The learner must be able to seek out persons and programs that respond to his or her perceived needs and those persons and programs in our universities must perceive and appreciate the "universe" of need and opportunity if our universities are to be related to and supported by that whole people.

We have at best only just begun. Perhaps financial exigency forces even intellectuals to reassess their private worlds. Perhaps the almost cynical resignation of new Ph.D.'s to teach the "lesser people" in an unbelievably tight labor market will bring our leadership institutions to a new humility within their pride.

Success and quality must be distributive if the family of man is to be a family of dignity. Man's intellect is indeed the pearl without price. Those who are professionally as well as personally committed to the life of the mind cannot afford to support the hierarchical cult which would respect only the intellect of the few.

Leaders will lead only if they understand they too are a contingent part within the whole. Leadership institutions will lead only if they understand they are a contingent part within the whole.

The best and the brightest are a many-splendored thing and they deserve the best of differentiated expertise on tap and available for the use of the whole society.

One of the dominant symbols of Christianity is that of the Mystical Body. "... they [are] many members, yet but one body. And the eye cannot say unto the hand, I have no need of thee: nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of you. Nay, much more those members of the body, which seem to be more feeble, are necessary." The world community and the community of higher education need to meditate on the secular but spiritual meaning of that symbol. It is obviously not a hierarchical one. It describes a body, the parts of which are different from one another, but not higher than one another.

I have not discussed curriculum, in-service training, or new schools or even attempted to describe the demography of the learner in the 70's. Others will, I trust, speak to those specific issues. Rather I have tried to point to a need for distributive rather than hierarchical quality if we are to share in the creation of a world of distributive justice.

There has been a basic, entrenched philosophy deep in the tradition of higher education and deep in the American tradition. Horatio Alger - and now even Hortense - might always become the President of the United States or a research professor at M.I.T. That was the American Dream. But, I believe, the American Greatness was the sense of purpose of the whole people.

If the 1975 Horatio Alger or Henry Adams can envision success only at the top, ninety percent of their brothers and sisters must be consigned to relative failure.

If our colleges and universities in their own professional world recruit, nurture, and send forth persons who see success for themselves and for their students only in those terms, they begin and nurture the self-fulfilling prophecy of mass failure by indifference to the potential of the broad-based population.

Learner-centered reform is contingent on teacher-centered reform. If the nation understands the reciprocal contingency, the dependency of the expert on the laymen as well as the layman on the expert, there is hope that we will re-form each other.